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The small butterfly
moves as though unburdened by
the world of desire

Poem from *The Spring of My Life: And Selected Haiku*
by Kobayashi Issa (Author) and Sam Hamill (Translator)

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Introduction

What if I told you that having less stuff could make you a happier person? It sounds a bit crazy, doesn't it? That's because every day, and everywhere we turn, we receive thousands of messages to the contrary: buy this, and you'll be prettier; own this, and you'll be more successful; acquire this, and your happiness will know no bounds.

Well, we've bought this, that, and the other thing. So we must be in seventh heaven, right? For most of us, the answer is "no." In fact, quite often, the opposite is true: many of these items, and their empty promises, are slowly sucking the money out of our pockets, the magic out of our relationships, and the joy out of our lives.

Do you ever look around your house, at all the things you've bought and inherited and been given, and feel overwhelmed instead of overjoyed? Are you struggling with credit card debt, and can barely recall the purchases on which you're making payments? Do you secretly wish a gale force wind would blow the clutter out of your home, leaving you an opportunity for a fresh start? If so, then a minimalist lifestyle may well be your salvation.

First, let's pull this term "minimalism" down to earth. It seems to have acquired a somewhat intimidating, elitist air, as

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it's often associated with chic, multimillion-dollar lofts with three pieces of furniture. The word conjures up images of spare, cool interiors, concrete floors, and gleaming white surfaces. It all sounds very sober, serious, and sterile. What role could it possibly play in lives filled with kids, pets, hobbies, junk mail, and laundry?

Most people hear the word "minimalism" and think "empty." Unfortunately, "empty" isn't altogether appealing; it's usually associated with loss, deprivation, and scarcity. But look at "empty" from another angle—think about what it *is* instead of what it isn't—and now you have "space." Space! That's something we could all use more of! Space in our closets, space in our garages, space in our schedules, space to think, play, create, and have fun with our families…now *that's* the beauty of minimalism.

Think of it this way: a container is most valuable when it's empty. We can't enjoy fresh coffee when old grounds are in our cup; and we can't showcase our garden's blooms when wilted flowers fill the vase. Similarly, when our homes—the containers of our daily lives—are overflowing with clutter, our souls take a backseat to our stuff. We no longer have the time, energy, and space for new experiences. We feel cramped and inhibited, like we can't fully stretch out and express ourselves.

Becoming minimalists puts us in control of our stuff. We reclaim our space, and restore function and potential to our homes. We remake our houses into open, airy, receptive containers for the substance of our lives. We declare independence from the tyranny of clutter. It's positively liberating!

Sounds great—but how do we get there? Where do we start? How is this book different from all those other books on organizing your life?

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Well, unlike other organizational books, this one isn't about buying fancy containers or storage systems to shuffle around your stuff; it's about *decreasing* the amount of stuff you have to deal with. Furthermore, you won't have to answer quizzes, make checklists, or fill out charts—who has time for that? And there won't be dozens of case studies about other people's junk; the focus here is on *you*.

We'll start by cultivating a minimalist mindset. Don't worry; it's not hard! We're just going to think about the rewards and benefits of a decluttered life; it'll provide the motivation we need later when dealing with grandma's old china. We'll learn to see our stuff for what it is, and weaken any power it may hold over us; and discover the freedom of living with just "enough" to meet our needs. We'll even get a little philosophical, and ponder how our new minimalism will enrich our lives and effect positive change in the world.

Why all the talk? Because decluttering is like dieting. We can jump right in, count our possessions like we count calories, and "starve" ourselves to get fast results. All too often, however, we'll end up feeling deprived, go on a binge, and wind up right back where we started. First, we have to change our attitudes and our habits—kind of like switching from a meat-and-potatoes to a Mediterranean diet. Developing a minimalist mindset will transform the way we make decisions about the stuff we have, and the stuff we bring into our lives. Instead of being a short-term fix, it'll be a long-term commitment to a new, wonderful way of life.

After our mental warm-up, we'll learn the STREAMLINE method—the top ten most effective techniques for achieving, and maintaining, a decluttered home. This is where the fun starts! We're going to have a fresh start for every drawer, every closet, and every room, and make sure that each thing we own

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makes a positive contribution to our households. We'll give every item a proper place, and establish limits to keep things under control. We'll steadily reduce the amount of stuff in our homes, and set up systems to ensure it doesn't pile up again in the future. Armed with these techniques, we will conquer clutter for good!

Each area of the house presents unique challenges. Therefore, we'll proceed room by room, exploring more specific ways to tackle each one. We'll start in the family room, creating a flexible, dynamic space in which to pursue our leisure activities. We'll debate the merits of each piece of furniture, and figure out what to do with all those books, DVDs, video games, and craft supplies. Then we'll move into the bedroom, where we'll purge the excess to produce a peaceful oasis for our weary souls. Our goal: a clear, calm, uncluttered space that relaxes and rejuvenates us.

Since so many of us suffer from overstuffed closets, we'll spend a whole chapter dealing with wardrobe issues. (Heed the advice therein, and you'll look fabulous with a fraction of your current clothes.) Then once we're in the groove, we'll attack the stacks of paperwork in our home offices, and reduce the flow into our inboxes from a flood to a trickle. Our minimalist makeover will tame even the messiest of workspaces!

Next, we'll turn a keen eye on our kitchens. We'll pare down our pots, pans, and place settings, and see how clean countertops and simple cookware can enhance our culinary prowess. After that, we'll take a bathroom break; and while we're in there, we'll cull its contents to create a chic, spa-like ambience. We'll even simplify our grooming routines, so we can make ourselves gorgeous with a minimum amount of fuss.

Of course, we can't forget about our basements, attics, and garages. The stuff here may be out of sight, but it's certainly not

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out of mind. After we get down and dirty in these storage spaces, the clutter will have nowhere left to hide! We'll also spend a little time talking about gifts, heirlooms, and souvenirs. We'll see how these critters sneak into our lives, and devise some creative ways to handle them.

Why stop at our four walls? Once we've decluttered our homes (and wondered why we didn't do this sooner!), we'll use our new minimalist attitude to streamline our schedules. We'll learn to say "no," set priorities, and get things done with ease and efficiency. We'll trim our to-do lists, and reclaim our time like we did our space—being sure to leave enough of it open, empty, and free.

Finally, we'll explore how being minimalists makes us better citizens of the planet, and helps us conserve its bounty for future generations. We'll look at the true impact of our consumer choices, examining both the human and environmental toll of the things we buy; and learn the far-reaching benefits of living lightly and gracefully on the Earth. The best part: we'll discover how saving space in our closets, and saving the world, go hand in hand.

Ready to sweep away the clutter once and for all? Just turn the page for your first dose of minimalist philosophy; in a few minutes, you'll be on the road to a simpler, more streamlined, and more serene life.

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